

City success from London to Hong Kong depends not only on financial prowess, but also on the well-being and mental health of residents

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Paul Yip argues that we should build inclusive cities and invest in projects which improve life for the poorest and most vulnerable. The UK government's well-being measurement is a lesson for cities like Hong Kong that wrongly equate economic progress with overall improvements to living standards.



Upon arriving in London to give [a talk at LSE Cities on suicide prevention in Hong Kong](#) a few weeks ago, I was bolstered by the news that the UK government was conducting its first ever national survey of subjective well-being. Broadening our measures of success from the purely economic is a necessary first step in improving quality of life in our cities.

High rates of suicide – 13.5 per 100,000 people in Hong Kong compared to 8.0 per 100,000 people in the UK – are a telling sign that all is not well in Hong Kong. In the shadows of its world-class transport system and iconic landscapes of wealth lies another city. Despite a 40 per cent increase in GDP per capita over the last decade, about 30 per cent of those on the lowest incomes actually make less money than they did a decade ago and 10 per cent of the working population still earn less than US\$10,000 a year. Hong Kong's Gini Coefficient (a statistical measure of income disparity) is ranked as one of the highest in the world – 0.535 (out of 1) in 2010 – and social mobility, especially amongst the younger generation, is stagnating.

In London, too, financial prowess has not yet translated into overall well-being: GVA (Gross Value Added) per capita is 70 per cent higher than the national average, but unemployment is significantly higher than all English regions except the North East at 10 per cent. Londoners do live longer than residents of most English regions, but [new data on subjective well-being](#) suggests that these longer lives are not necessarily happier lives: Londoners reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and significantly lower levels of life satisfaction, sense of worth and happiness.

In Hong Kong, improving mental health means paying greater attention to our most isolated and vulnerable groups and communities. Many poorer residents live far away from Hong Kong's financial district, Central, in new towns built to accommodate Hong Kong's rising population in the 1970s. Despite the connectivity provided by Hong Kong's transport system, low-income groups can become isolated due to the greater travel costs and distances. Such physical isolation has been compounded by problems of inadequate job opportunities and public facilities. Residents are relatively young, less well educated and come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than the general population of Hong Kong. These vulnerable groups face a host of problems, including low wages, insecure or unstable jobs, domestic violence and suicide.

Hong Kong's teenagers and older people are especially at risk of suicide. Teenagers are less likely to seek the help or support they need in order to address their problems, and many have low self-esteem, lack problem-solving skills and consequently have poor mental health. For older people, the high cost of public transport can create a lack of mobility, weakening their social and family support networks and therefore isolating them from the wider community. Already in Hong Kong there are 334 people aged below 15 years or above 64 years (the dependent population) to every 1000 people aged between 15 and 64 years (the productive population). As Hong Kong's population 'greys' further, suicide risk for the elderly is likely to become a growing problem.

Hong Kong's success depends not only on its financial prowess, but also on the well-being and mental health of its residents. We should learn from the UK's efforts to measure subjective well-being, but collecting data alone is not enough to improve the quality of life of our city. We need to ask ourselves some very deep and hard questions.

How can we continue to reconcile skyrocketing property prices on Hong Kong Island – at an average cost of more than US\$2,000 per square foot – with the fact that half of all households have a living space of less than 500 square feet (46 square metres)? If Hong Kong's income distribution becomes more unequal, can the city really claim to be a model of sustainable development? And why is it that we are investing in a new high-speed rail connection to mainland China rather than in the substantial proportion of our community that are being left behind and disconnected from their own rapidly changing city? Is Hong Kong risking the overall well-being of its inhabitants? Even with outstanding economic achievements and world-class infrastructure, a city is only as strong as its weakest link.

Information on the 2011 Urban Age 'Cities, Health and Well-being' conference in Hong Kong, organised by LSE Cities and the Alfred Herrhausen Society in partnership with the University of Hong Kong, is [available here](#).

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